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DIVISION OF FORENSIC SCIENCE

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
275 West Front Street, Missoula, Mt. 59801 (406) 728-4970

Ronald L. Rivers, M.D.
State Medical Examiner

Jay M. Glass
Director of Forensic Services

Arnold B. Melnikoff
Laboratory Bureau Chief

August, 1981

MAILING CARTONS AND TUBES

Each coroner in the state should have on-hand one or two state office toxicology mailing cartons. These are separate and DIFFERENT from the blood alcohol mailing kits. The large carton is for toxicology samples taken during the autopsy.

The smaller carton or mailing tubes are for samples taken on death cases where no autopsy has been performed. Check and make sure you have them and know where they are. If not, contact Jeanne at the Missoula Office.

TWENTY FOUR (24) HOUR CALL SERVICE:

Remember, there is a forensic pathologist available to consult with on any aspect of death investigation. Also, during those hours in which the Missoula Office is closed, a message can be left along with your phone number.

AUTOPSY CHARTS

The Missoula Office has diagrams and charts available for multiple gun shot and stab wounds. If you do not have these diagrams and charts, they can be obtained simply by calling Edna or Bernice at our office.

WELCOME ABOARD

Our new administrative assistant, Dawn Kangas, will join the staff on July 27. She was formerly with the Department of Justice's Budget Office. Her experience in this area will help us render efficient service for a minimal expense.

HAVE A WONDERFUL SUMMER!

STATE DOCUMENTS COLLECTION

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ON CALL SCHEDULE - MONTANA STATE MEDICAL EXAMINER

AUGUST, 1981

275 W. Front Street
Missoula, Montana 59802

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
						1 Ken Mueller
2 Ken Mueller	3	4	5	6	7	8 Ron Rivers
9 Ron Rivers	10	11	12	13	14	15 Ken Mueller
16 Ken Mueller	17 John Pfaff	18 John Pfaff	19 John Pfaff	20 John Pfaff	21 John Pfaff	22 Ken Mueller
23 Ken Mueller / John Pfaff 30	24 Ken Mueller / Ron Rivers 31	25 Ken Mueller	26 Ken Mueller	27 Ken Mueller	28 Ken Mueller	29 John Pfaff

Telephone Numbers: State Office - 728-4970
WATS Line - 243-5796

Home Phone: Dr. Rivers - 728-2033 (Home)

(week nights call unless otherwise indicated)

John Pfaff - Great Falls
Hospital - 727-3333
Home - 727-3905

Ken Mueller- Billings
Hospital - 657-7000
Home - 248-3024

August, 1981
Drownings
R.L. Rivers, M.D.

The sky was not cloudy all day over the very active recreational lake. At one cove, a small group of serious sweating sheriffs were gathered, "Doesn't anybody believe in life jackets anymore?" exclaimed the sheriff-coroner as he observed the body just pulled from the lake. The young man's face had several deep gashes as well as a large sharp cut on his right hand. "Probably shooting the rapids and ran into some rocks before spilling into the lake" the deputy drawled. "I don't know" answered the sheriff, "We better have the Associate Medical Examiner take a look at him".

The deputy wondered why the sheriff/coroner was wasting everybody's time. "There ain't no such thing as a drowning test, so why fool around?" he asked himself. "Heck, the biggest problem is going to get fingerprints on those wrinkled up fingertips, and then he probably won't have a file anyway.

QUESTIONS:

1. Was the sheriff/coroner correct in asking the associate medical examiner to become involved? What is the most likely cause of the wounds?

2. Is there a drowning test?

3. What other methods are used for identification besides fingerprints?

ANSWERS:

1. While the cause of death may seem quite apparent, the sheriff still needs to determine the accurate manner of death. This may be suicide (a jump from a bridge into the rocks), a homicide (hit over the head several times and tossed in the drink) or natural (died from a ruptured blood vessel in the brain) while fishing.

Even if the death is accidental the real cause of death may only be determined at autopsy. The wounds are most likely due to boat propellers. The same type of injuries as seen on bodies found in the ocean are incorrectly attributed to sharks!

2. There are no specific diagnostic tests from drowning. The Gettler Test - comparison of blood chlorides from the right and left sides of the heart - has such a wide range of error that the results are questionable.

Hemorrhage into the mastoid sinuses can be found in various types of trauma as well as absent in documented drownings. Diatoms, once thought to be found in the lungs of drowning victims, can be found in many of the organs of living people. "Water in the lungs" or pulmonary edema is frequently found in overdoses and cardiac failures. Water in the stomach may or may not be present in drowning cases.

The most important aspect of the complete autopsy in suspected drowning victims, such as this case, is the absence of any demonstrable cause of death. This will eliminate any doubts or suspicions that the family may raise at a later date.

3. Other methods useful in identifying dead bodies are dental comparisons, x-ray (compared with antemortem x-rays) hair (compared with hair from hair brush at home) serology (rare blood type) or previous surgical implants (pacemaker or hip pin). Less reliable means are identification by clothing or family members.